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I'm curled up in a fetal position in a tiny wooden box cradling a duck against my chest. It is completely dark, but I feel motion and hear wheels underneath as I'm rolled out on stage.

The duck makes soft noises of distress and ruffles some, but I stroke its feathers and coo at it.

The duck shits. I hear it and then smell it.

*Sigh.*

This isn't the first time that's happened, however, and I came prepared. There is a roll of paper towels wedged against my back. Now it is just a waiting game until I'm free to open the box and use them.

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Confined, I can barely hear Charles' patter about the "ghost box", but eventually the wheels start to move and I feel myself being spun around. Again and again.

Distant laughter from the audience.

Music starts and there is a knocking against the wood. My cue.

I release the trapdoor and pop out of the hidden compartment at the bottom of the ghost box. On the other side of the plywood door is a theater full of people enjoying the show - "Charles Bach presents: An Evening of Magic and Entertainment!"

On my side of the door, there is only a snowy white duck standing next to a splotch of green shit.

"Dumb duck," I whisper, taking the paper towels and wiping the mess away. Graciously, the duck moves to a far corner while I work quickly. I don't have much time before Charles returns. Finished, I gently push the duck's head down and close the trap door on top of him.

He quacks in disagreement, but not loud enough to be heard over the dance music going on outside.

The wheels have been locked so the box doesn't move when Charles and I make the switch. He's been using a series of colorful sheets to release the ghosts from the box - two female dancers who had been waiting behind a screen, and it was time to free the last ghost. Up comes the sheet. I step out of the lower door and grab the top of the sheet where Charles' hands just were as he's swinging it across the front of the box. Charles jumps forward wrapped in the sheet - the last ghost - and I continue the flourishing motion, showing the audience my back as I - dressed up and primed to look like Charles - enter the box and close the door behind me.

Hidden within the walls of the ghost box, I stretch and pop the kinks from my back. I've a few minutes, while the bed-sheet ghosts do their little dance, to prepare.

I open the trap door and the duck immediately pokes his head out. He gives me a look of confused betrayal and slowly, tentatively flaps his wings as if he'd been cooped up all his life and had forgotten how to fly.

"Give me a break," I whisper, lifting the duck and setting him off to the side. I use more of the paper towels to wipe down the bottom of the box, and then lay out plenty of sheets to cover the floor. I lower myself into the secret compartment and sit there, holding the fowl, waiting for the song to end.

It does; followed closely by gasps, laughter and applause. Charles and the other ghosts have whipped off their sheets and revealed themselves to a surprised audience.

I go down and curl into a ball. I leave the duck out of the secret compartment and close the lid over my head.

The ghost box is the grand finale so I get to stay there, cramped and in complete darkness, while the audience claps and laughs. From the noise, I can picture Charles swinging the prop's door open and - surprise! A duck! The audience erupts.

Applause abates and swells as Charles presents his assistants - two pretty young

dancers awkwardly wearing cocktail dresses - they bow individually and then as a group.

Charles releases the duck which flaps about the stage, quacking and grousing, until Charles raises a finger and the duck takes a flying leap into his arms. They make a final bow to a standing ovation.

And I'm at the center of it all, hidden in a four by four by two oblong hold with a wadded up mess of paper towels.

My name is Virgil Templeton, it is 1988, I'm seventeen years old, and my life is magic.

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"Pick a card, any card."

Robin reaches a hand out to the deck fanned before him.

"Not that one!" I wail, throwing the cards up and at his face. Like a boa, they fly around his neck, get stuck in his hair, drape over his shoulders. Robin tilts his head and narrows his eyes. My left hand moves in my pocket and the cards zip back into a complete deck; coming to rest in my right hand's palm.

Robin considers this for a moment then admits, "Pretty good."

High praise coming from Robin Wyatt, owner of "Magic by Robin" - a cubby-hole of a store located in the nose-bleed third level of Metcalf South mall.

"Risk of a deadly paper-cut on the neck." he gingerly touches his card-scraped throat. "But that could be a bonus. So few fatal card tricks these days. Okay, my turn."

He takes a deck from under the counter, shuffles it, and hands it to me. Of course it will appear to be a regular deck, but I make a quick check just the same: weight correct, not-striped, nothing sticky, faces normal; I'm not going to act like a dick - ruin the fun by taking too much time flipping every card or inspecting each one under a magnifying glass. After holding it for a moment, I turn the deck over, fan it across the

desk, collapse it, cut it once towards the bottom, and let it set.

Robin picks it up; another shuffle (quick hands - did I miss something?) and fans the cards towards me.

I take one. Five of hearts.

Robin places the deck on the counter and motions for me to return the card.

I tuck it into the middle then keep my hand over the pile.

"Go ahead," Robin says.

I shuffle the card thoroughly. Twice.

Robin retrieves them, straightens the edges, puts the deck back in its box, sets it under the counter, dusts his hands and says, "So I saw that little hootenanny you kids put on at the Miner's theater." He made a 'so-so' motion by teeter-tottering his hand.

I looked around, leaned over the counter, saw the deck just sitting there....

"What's with all the dancing?" Robin asked.

"Oh, that's Chuck," I replied, still distracted. Robin had returned to his ledger and wasn't even making eye-contact now. "He says you gotta do something different to get noticed in the magic game."

"Dancing?"

I shrug.

"So where were you when everybody else was taking a bow?"

"Oh, you know me. The shy type."

"Come on, man. You shouldn't let him do that to you."

"What do you mean?"

"It's obvious. He's intimidated by you so he keeps you hidden."

"No, it isn't like that. See, I was...."

"Yeah, you were in the bottom of the ghost box. Anybody paying the slightest bit of attention would know. Shit. We saw you and Bobby and those girls shuffling props over the stage all night, then when it's time to take the bows, hey now, there's Bobby and the girls but what happened to the other guy? That tall, goofy looking kid? I wonder where he could be. Hmmm?"

"Well, I was all dressed up to look like Chuck. I had the hair and...."

Robin was giving me the fish-eye so I dropped it.

"He basically gave away the closing gag - the grand finale! - just to keep you down."

"Aw, come on. It was easier for me to stay hidden."

"No, I've known Chuck for years and that's who he is: short on imagination; long on ego. How many of those props did you build? How many were your ideas?"

"Not, you know... not many. I tweaked a few of them."

Robin shook his head. "You need to get out from under that guy. Fucking dancing, man."

Just then an electronic buzzer sounded indicating somebody had crossed the store's threshold. I turned to watch an incredibly attractive young woman - blown-out Farrah Fawcett blonde hair wearing a tight florescent red tank top and skimpy polyester shorts: red with purple piping. All neatly showcasing an hourglass figure. Her eyes were large and expressive and, when she saw me, her face lit up with a countenance of good-humor.

She came towards me, said "Hi," and leaned over the counter. She had to raise up on her tiptoes and I couldn't help but stare as she retrieved the deck of cards from underneath the far side of the counter.

I looked at Robin, expecting some reaction. He continued studying the ledger, totally disinterested.

"So...." the beauty released the cards from their box. She fanned them over the counter then put a fingertip between two full, red lips as if considering something important. "That one," she exclaimed, tapping a card with the recently moisten fingertip. She used the same finger to slide it away from the fan.

"Well?" she turned and faced me with hands on her hips. "Is that your card?"

With an audible gulp, I turned the card: Five of hearts.

"Ha!" she exclaimed. "I love heart cards." She put her hands on my shoulders, leaned in and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. And then she left the store without a word to Robin.

It took me a while to regulate the oxygen and blood-flow throughout my body, but once I'd regained control, I cleared my throat and said, "You win."

I took out my wallet and placed five dollars on the cards.

Robin made the money disappear into his cash register.

"I know you came up with the best gags in that show," Robin continued our conversation as if nothing had happened. "I could tell. They had your personality: stupid, but in a fun way."

"Thanks... I think."

"Hey, at least they have a personality. It was painful watching Chuck do them. They weren't his and it showed."

I shrugged. The five of hearts was still in my hand and I ran my thumb over the back, feeling the damp spot. I held it to my nose and gave a sniff.

"Oh, for...." Robin produced a pad of paper and a pen from thin air and writing. It looked like a phone number.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Don't get your hopes up - it ain't her digits. I'm a good magician, but nowhere near good enough to get you laid." He handed me the paper.

"Yeah, I doubt Penn, Teller, The Amazing Randy or even Jesus would have enough magic for that." I took the sheet and before I could focus my eyes on the writing, it burst into flames. I yelped; a mix of surprise and glee.

"Ooops," Randy smirked. "Sorry. Wrong paper. Here." Another scrap appeared between his fingers.

I took it from him, this one safely, and read the text. It was a name and phone number:

Michael Relling: 555-1686

"Call him. Tell him I gave you the number," Robin explained. "Chances are he'll hang up on you, but if he doesn't.... Hey."

"Who is he?"

"Could be the answer to your prayers. Or a big waste of time."

"No, really."

Robin rubbed his chin and considered his next words.

"You're good, kid," he started. "Very good. But you're raw and sloppy. Your gags are.... We'll, they show spark. But your delivery is like a dog humping a leg. Yeah, we



know you're down there and you've got some thrust on you but, Jesus. Slow down and let us enjoy the show. Right?"

"You put it that way."

"Go see Mr. Relling. Let him get a look; show him a few of your tricks. If he likes you....?"

"What?"

"He might agree to teach you."

"So?"

"Relling is Merlin, kiddo. He takes you on, you're the sorcerer's apprentice."